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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000178

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: GOB ALLOWS HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, WITHIN LIMITS

REF: A. MINSK 154

[1](#)B. OBERNDORFER/MOORE E-MAIL 2/13/2007

[1](#)C. OBERNDORFER/MOORE E-MAIL 2/21/2007

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Ambassador's participation in a press conference on humanitarian assistance to a regional children's hospital gave the USG unusually good coverage in Belarusian state media. Child Health International also continues to successfully provide humanitarian assistance by training local medical staff. Unfortunately, security services recently sought to intimidate the Minsk representative for U.S.-based Counterpart International's Community Humanitarian Assistance Program, demonstrating the GOB's strong suspicion of whatever assistance it does not control. End summary.

Rare Positive Press for the Embassy

[1](#)2. (U) On January 23, Ambassador visited Mogilyov to publicize the USG-supported delivery of advanced antibiotics to the Regional Children's Hospital. The hospital was one of 14 throughout Belarus to receive medications donated by American pharmaceutical companies and transported by CitiHope with the support of the State Department. State media covered the press conference and Ambassador's tour of the facility, resulting in favorable articles in the local state press.

[1](#)3. (C) The positive coverage contrasts starkly with typical state reporting (reftel), as well as with the aggressive questions from a state television reporter at the following event in Mogilyov at the local American Corner. A regional ideology officer told the library director after the event that he would need to talk to her about why students had asked the Ambassador political questions. (Note: The American Corner director strongly hinted the students asking the offending questions were put up to it by the BKGB, noting she had never seen them at the Corner before. End note.)

Medical Training Moves Forward More Quickly than Research

[1](#)4. (C) On February 16, Dr. William Novick of Child Health International and a team of ten doctors and nurses told Ambassador about the success of their efforts to improve care in Belarus for those born with congenital heart defects. Dr. Novick said that thanks to training previously provided under a EUR/ACE grant, Belarusian surgeons could now perform all but the most complicated surgeries.

15. (C) The group included three NIH officials in country to negotiate with the Ministry of Health over a program to conduct genetic testing of children inflicted by a heart abnormality seen more commonly in the areas contaminated by Chernobyl than anywhere else in the world. They told Ambassador the Ministry of Health had not yet agreed to allow the analysis of blood samples to take place at NIH, even though NIH facilities would allow for much more reliable results.

Other Assistance Program Partners Endure GOB Harassment

16. (C) On January 17, Deputy Pol/E Chief met with Sergey Khomchenko from the Counterpart International (CI) NIS office, visiting from Tbilisi, and Viktor Panfilenok, CI's contact for their unregistered operations in Belarus. They described the significant need in Belarus for food, clothing and shoes. Unlike CitiHope, CI distributes much of its assistance through NGOs. Panfilenok said the American assistance is vital for many of the NGOs to continue to attract members.

17. (C) Belarusian authorities detained Panfilenok on February 1 and forced him to sign papers that he had violated Belarusian law by working for an unregistered organization (ref B). However, authorities then told Panfilenok the case was dropped, returned the computers that had been seized, asked him to restart the program and even advised him to tell Embassy officials to engage in more public humanitarian actions as they did in Mogilyov (ref C).

Comment: GOB Values Control and Image

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18. (C) The GOB continues to view channeling even benign assistance via independent NGOs as borderline subversive activity. In contrast, the GOB generally does not impede assistance programs, such as those run by CitiHope and Child Health International, which work through the Ministry of Health. (Note: The proposed NIH program might be an exception since any benefit is long term, and in the short term the GOB may fear conducting analyses in the United States highlights the shortcomings of local health facilities, which media like to portray as state of the art. End note.)

19. (C) Post views public affairs events connected to humanitarian assistance as an indirect route to breaking through the usual state media blitz portraying the USG as an enemy of Belarus (ref A). For its part, the GOB likely hopes (in vain) that post will succumb to the temptation to focus on "feel-good" events to the exclusion of continuing our regular visits with opposition leaders in the regions.
Stewart